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Good morning Senator Slossberg, Representative Spallone and members of the Government Administration and Elections Committee. My name is Andrew Schneider, I am Executive Director of the ACLU of Connecticut, and I am here to oppose Raised Bill 5404 which would block inmate access to personnel, medical, or any similar records of employees of the Department of Correction (DOC).

Prisons are public institutions funded with taxpayer money, managed and regulated by government officials, and overseen by the state legislature and other governmental bodies. Prisons and jails in Connecticut cost hundreds of millions of dollars each year and house thousands of people. It is critical that such institutions be subject to the same, if not more, public disclosure as any other public institution.

Over the years, Connecticut has seen case after case of gross abuse in our prisons and jails, including serious violations of Constitutional rights. Prisoners need to be able to protect themselves from the abuses of government officials and the public has a right to know what happens behind prison walls. Inmates are sometimes the only ones who know and can bring to light the problems of the prison system. One of the only tools prisoners have to seek protection from abuse is through the state Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) law.

The state FOIA law is a tool for all citizens to use to keep government accountable to the people. Prisoners may be behind bars, but they are still citizens and the state is still accountable for its conduct towards them.

The FOIA law already protects critical private information from being released to the public and sets forth particular information that is excluded from FOIA disclosure. If there are documents that would create a security risk not covered by already existing exceptions, then exempt those documents from FOIA. Wholesale exclusion of an entire group of people, like prisoners, from their rights as citizens of this state to seek information about government activities is gratuitous and unnecessary. Such exclusion simply creates state-approved discrimination against a disfavored group.

Requests for personnel files of DOC employees by incarcerated individuals are a tiny fraction of the FOIA requests that agency responds to each year. While the DOC may see FOIA requests as something designed to annoy state workers and burden the system, such burdens are necessary to ensure that our democracy remains transparent and accountable..

We need FOIA to shine light into the darkened corners of government agencies. Some of the darkest corners exist behind prison walls. Therefore I urge this committee to reject Raised Bill 5404.